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Contras prepare to cross border into homeland

Nicaraguans botched attempt to destroy rebels, block attack

By Roger Fontaine
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U.S. officials believe the recent incursion of Nicaragua's Marxist Sandinista troops into Honduras was a botched attempt to wipe out resistance forces before they could launch a dry-season offensive into Nicaragua.

"One objective was to block the infiltration [of anti-Sandinista forces], but principally it was to get into position to attack [their] permanent facilities," a Reagan administration official said.

The rebel facilities inside Honduras in the so-called Las Vegas salient include a hospital and training camp

near the village of Yamales and a rebel headquarters at Capire.

"They intended to destroy them or force the Contras to withdraw," the same official said. Honduran government sources now claim up to 2,500 Sandinista soldiers were deployed in the attack penetrating nine miles inside Honduran territory. U.S. sources are more cautious in the count, saying as many as 1,500 were involved.

The Sandinista objective differed little from the one that inspired a similar strike into Honduran territory last March. But U.S. analysts now say the tactics and results varied from last spring.

The March attack was, in fact, a frontal, blitzkrieg-style assault on rebel forces that, instead of collapsing, fought back stubbornly, badly bloodying a better equipped Sandinista force of more than 1,500 men.

The Sandinista tactics last March, U.S. intelligence sources indicate, were the product of Nicaragua's principal Cuban military adviser, Maj. Gen. Arnaldo Ochoa, described as an aggressive commander who prefers lightning strikes.

In contrast, the man who succeeded him, Brig. Gen. Nestor Lopez, is known as "plodding and systematic," more in the Soviet style.

U.S. intelligence indicates Gen. Lopez cautiously took his time in positioning strengthened Sandinista forces just inside the Honduran border. But when Nicaraguan patrols were hit by rebel counterattacks, the

Cuban adviser decided to forgo a frontal assault and deployed his forces in an enveloping maneuver

"This latest move is consistent with his style," one official said.

It was fatal to the success of the operation. The redeployed Sandinista forces made contact with and shot up several Honduran army patrols near Las Trojes last Friday.

Most U.S. intelligence analysts doubt the attacks on the Hondurans were deliberate.

They note Sandinista tactical intelligence is poor. "They may have not known the Hondurans were there," one source said.

The subsequent uproar in the

Honduran press forced that government to act with force. The reaction also surprised the Sandinistas, who were counting on Honduran forces to look the other way, according to U.S. officials.

Late Saturday, the Honduran air force struck, attacking Sandinista positions just inside the salient. The bombing proved ineffective. The following day, in the early afternoon, the Hondurans requested U.S. troop-lift assistance, which was promptly given by President Reagan, according to officials.

With that assurance, the Honduran air force then struck Nicaraguan positions in Nicaragua, principally Wamblan and Wiwili, the principal forward base for the Sandinista army conducting anti-Contra operations in the north. Nicaraguan officials have claimed civilian targets

were hit. The Hondurans have said nothing, but American officials say U.S.-supplied ground attack aircraft struck the main base at Wiwili and damaged a Sandinista helicopter.

Although Nicaraguan anti-aircraft guns have been strengthened near the Nicaraguan-Honduran border, U.S. officials say, the Sandinistas proved ineffective against the Honduran air force.

"They fired a lot of rounds, but they didn't hit anything," one official told The Washington Times. "They are poor students of the Cubans."

"The Hondurans laid down a marker. And they have taken care of their national honor," an analyst said. As a result, the Hondurans are letting the Sandinista forces withdraw without further contact.

Most of the Sandinista strike

force is believed to have returned to Nicaragua, although the Honduran high command said Sandinista troops held four tiny villages just inside the border.

The number of casualties is not known. U.S. officials say Nicaraguan resistance morale is once more on the rise after the Sandinista failure, and some rebel units are taking advantage of their enemies' retreat and the dry season by re-entering Nicaragua.

Few officials expect the Sandinistas to remain on the defensive, but they can only speculate on any new strategy.

But the objective will not change, they caution. "They've got to try and block [the rebels] and somehow knock out the camps," one source said.